

Greek Drama, History, and the Rise of Democracy

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During the course of the fifth century BCE, the Athenian theater became what Frederic Jameson refers to in his well-known analysis of postmodernism¹ as a “cultural dominant,” the locus for an ingathering of essential but often contradictory features of the larger social order. Generations of scholars have scoured the corpus of Athenian drama for democratic or antidemocratic leanings, and have found what they were searching for, but without reaching any consensus about the political stance or role of either tragedy or comedy. My own work in this area has moved in a different direction. I understand the contradictory perspectives found in the plays as signs of theater’s participation in the democratic life of the polis. The simultaneous maturation of Athens’ theatrical and political institutions in the course of the fifth century suggests that the political engagement of drama is not a matter of commentary from outside the democratic regime, as it were, but rather of response from within it. In Athenian tragedy and comedy, the most disparate tendencies and preoccupations of the larger society could be and were reflected and debated, their contradictions exposed, explored, and perhaps at times even mediated.

On this view, Athenian theater can be understood as an integral element in the construction and testing of the democratic regime. That does not, however, imply an uncritical acceptance of democratic ideology. Rather, the fundamental right and duty of a citizen (that of exercising *parrhesia*, free and frank speech) is the lifeblood of the theater, too, and that includes the possibility of frank criticism. Thus, the democratic

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credentials of both tragedy and comedy do not depend upon promoting or defending democracy, but rather on taking part in an ongoing dialogue that only democratic societies can and must risk if they are to be true to their democratic ideals. More surprisingly perhaps, drama stages what we might call thought experiments that test the limits of democracy by giving a public forum on the stage to those who have none in the democratic city, imaginatively extending citizen rights to those who denied them in reality (women, slaves, foreigners). Thus, the theatre can be seen both as a locus of debate about the merits of existing democratic ideology and practice and as a place to envision what, for better or worse, democracy might yet become.

Obviously, the kind of engagement I argue for occurs differentially in comedy and tragedy. The two genres are almost always treated separately in discussions of Athenian theater and politics, but it is important to see that both are part of the same institution, under the aegis of Dionysus, the god who loosens tongues and disrupts conventional boundaries. Tragedy and comedy both mediate traditional ideas, values, and poetic forms in ways that make them relevant to the city as a whole. Jean-Pierre Vernant has famously described the “tragic moment” in which the heroic individualism of the legendary past is made to confront the (at least ideological) egalitarianism of the fifth-century citizen.² Comedy may be thought of as working in reverse, constituting a comic hero from the stuff of the common citizen, and empowering him imaginatively to overturn forms of power felt as oppressive or counterproductive for the *demos*. In the end, both these forms of theatrical expression, distinctive and yet linked in so many ways, add their particular voice to the dialogue, the debate, even the dissent that was part of the political life of the democratic state. It is not that the theater was designed as a way of doing politics; rather it shares and practices an idea of the citizen’s discursive freedom and engagement that was at the heart of Athenian democratic self-understanding.

I have developed an argument for this view of theatrical texts as a form of democratic discourse elsewhere, and will not to repeat it here.³ For the present purpose, this perspective forms a backdrop for consideration of

a related, and also much contested, question: how to read contemporary history in our theatrical texts. In the case of tragedy, approaches have ranged from elaborate allegoresis, in which the figures and situations of the drama are said to represent and comment upon figures and situations from contemporary political life, to the resolute rejection of any political content as such for tragedy, which is to be understood as an essentially religious and philosophical discourse. An interesting case is Euripides' *Trojan Women*, which would seem to have a very strong case for an interpretation that makes it a response to the Athenian sack of Melos so memorably recorded by Thucydides. In the last twenty years, however, a number of scholars have accepted the view that there could not have been sufficient time between the destruction of Melos—probably no earlier than December 416—and the production of *Trojan Women* in March 415 for the play to have reflected the Melian disaster.⁴ For some, the attraction of this view seems to be that it permits the removal of the play from the realm of politics altogether, in order to refocus it on concepts like the uncertainty of human fortune or the need to accept the gods' will.⁵ Others are eager to avoid the implication that the play condemns specifically Athenian excess and cruelty.⁶ It is worth saying, however, that by the time the play was produced, it would have been difficult for an Athenian audience to stick to philosophy or to avoid reflecting on Melos and Athens' role in its destruction.⁷

In the case of Aristophanic comedy, of course, references to contemporary figures and events are often quite explicit. Nevertheless, because of the difficulty in finding a coherent set of political objectives embodied in the plays, there is no consensus on their political thrust. Indeed, Michael Silk recently argued that politics are merely the medium for works engaged primarily in the linguistic and poetic possibilities of satire.⁸

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This paper will briefly explore the twin questions of democratic ideology and contemporary politics in Athenian drama by focusing on an extraordinary but somewhat neglected tragedy of Euripides, the *Phoenician*

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Women, in comparison to an obviously related drama, Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, and a comedy seldom if ever mentioned in connection with it, Aristophanes' *Birds*. *Phoenissae*, as I have argued elsewhere, is among other things a response to *Septem* that systematically reverses many of the most fundamental premises of the Aeschylean tragedy.⁹ What *Phoenissae* shares with *Birds*, on the other hand, is an extensive and intensive development of the theme of *philotimia*: ambition.

The identical and yet fatally conflicting ambitions of Eteocles and Polynices are at the heart of Euripides' treatment of their mutual destruction, which (as we shall see) is explicitly and emphatically detached from the fate of their city. In this respect, the contrast with Aeschylus could hardly be greater. In *Septem*, we never meet Polynices, but his central significance for the play is as a threat to the very survival of Thebes. Eteocles, the central figure of the drama, is by contrast the city's stalwart defender. His tragedy comes with the recognition that his duty to defend the city will bring about the final fulfillment of the curse on the house, to which his father has condemned both his sons. And yet, this mutual destruction is the device by which the polis is saved from mortal peril. In *Phoenissae*, a whole series of contrivances severs the fate of the royal house from that of the city. Oedipus' curse is treated as a sort of annoying contingency that gives neither brother a moment's pause. Eteocles, indeed, is startlingly dismissive of both his father and the curse (lines 763-65):

He brings the charge of folly upon himself for having blinded his eyes. I can hardly praise him: he will kill us with his curses, if he gets his way. What drives Eteocles is the willful, indeed stubbornly self-willed, desire for triumph over his fraternal enemy, and it must be said that it drives Polynices no less. He has already expressed the same intention in a chilling exchange at lines 621-2:

Polynices: Where will you be stationed before the towers?

Eteocles : Why do you ask?

Polynices: I'll take my place opposite.

Eteocles: Desire ($\partial\rho\omega$) for that seizes me, too. We are free to follow the seer Tiresias' lead and see the brothers as acting under the influence of daemonic possession ($\delta\alpha\iota\mu\omicron\nu\leftrightarrow\nu\tau\alpha\omega$, 888), but this text does not encourage us to think in such terms, as *Septem* certainly does.

On the contrary, the clash of the brothers is treated as willful and fully willed by both, with the possible destruction of the polis apparently of little or no concern to them. Euripides underlines this unmistakably in two of his most remarkable plot devices. First, he adds an entirely novel twist that renders the battle to come irrelevant to the city's safety. Tiresias makes his seemingly obligatory appearance in a Theban drama to explain to the astounded Creon that Ares has suddenly demanded the sacrifice of a pure victim from among the descendants of the Sown Men, to expiate (of all things) Cadmus' slaying of Ares' dragon at the time of Thebes's founding. Only Creon's son, the unmarried Menoeceus, qualifies. Creon, appalled, responds that he will never sacrifice his child to ransom his city, a complete reversal from the Creon of Sophocles' *Antigone*, who puts the city before every other consideration, and a remarkably frank statement of the preference for *genos* over polis that characterizes this play. Menoeceus himself, however, is equally clear about his course. Shrewdly pretending to acquiesce in his father's plan for escape, Menoeceus tricks him into leaving by artful dissimulation, then announces his true intention: rather than go into shameful exile, he will offer his life to save the city. In so doing, Menoeceus guarantees Thebes' safety before the battle even begins.

The second element concerns the battle itself. Not only is the brothers' mutual slaughter not figured as the city's salvation, but the battle ends in a Theban victory without them even meeting. Only when pressed by Jocasta to reveal the her sons' further plans does the Messenger from the battlefield reluctantly reveal that Eteocles has proposed to fight his brother in single combat, and that Polynices has accepted. This way of presenting the duel as an entirely gratuitous act is as un-Aeschylean as possible, the very antithesis of the response of a brother who discovers that he must face his brother in the battle to save his city, and accepts his doom. The

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Aeschylean story of a fated fall is thus transformed into a story of self-destruction through the passionate pursuit of selfish ends, of ambition for power run amok.

Earlier in the play, the die was cast, as it were, in the great debate scene between the brothers, staged and moderated by their mother, Jocasta. All three use arguments that touch on aspects of contemporary political ideology, and this may well have been part of the pleasure of the scene for the original audience. Most obviously, Eteocles' praise of sole rule (τυραννεω, the inevitable opposite of democracy in Athenian ideological discourse) as "the greatest of gods" (line 506), is countered by Jocasta with the democratic catchword of equality (οσσητηω, lines 536, 542), which she turns into a cosmic principle of equality in hopes of persuading her sons to share power. This is an argument congenial to supporters of democracy, in which offices and duties shared among citizens in succession have a central role. However, Jocasta is no more a theorist of democracy than the Sophoclean Jocasta who scorns the oracles in *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a systematic skeptic. Her use of the language of public discourse here is aimed above all at meeting her sons' philosophical and political arguments head on. The welfare of the polis is at stake, but Jocasta's concern is all for the survival and well-being of both sons, and the fate of the city enters her argument in relation to its effects on them. As with her hopes of saving Oedipus in Sophocles' play, so here her well-meaning attempt at arbitration fails, defeated by her sons' ambition for rule. Jocasta's final words decry "the most hateful thing of all: the folly of two people who strive for the same thing" (lines 584-85). The sufferings that will beset the city are expressed only insofar as they convey the folly from which a mother is intent upon dissuading her sons: would Eteocles really rather be sole ruler (τυραννεω) than save the city (560)? Would Polynices really be willing to sack his own city and dedicate its spoils as trophies to Zeus (570-74)? Jocasta's argument, and the entire debate scene, present the impending crisis as dependent neither upon fate, nor divine will, nor fear of the gods'

retribution, but rather as the result of Eteocles' refusal to give up absolute power and Polynices' mad willingness to destroy what he claims to love most, his own fatherland.

Jocasta's truce, by bringing her sons together in debate, illustrates their intransigent refusal of compromise and constitutes an essential stage in the dramatic action as Euripides conceives it, above all as the moment in which personal ambition eradicates any serious concern for the well-being of the polis, or indeed of politics in the strict sense of the term. Both brothers assert instead their own right, and their own overwhelming desire, to rule. Eteocles is more blatant, with his worship of Tyranny as a goddess, but Polynices' claim of justice is finally a matter of recovering "what is mine" (τῆμαυτοζ, 484) with the city he claims as his forced to suffer as it must. Jocasta, in refuting both her sons, castigates them equally for their unbridled ambition to rule, whatever the cost.

Let me now briefly attempt to historicize the contrasts we have noted in the two plays. The happy circumstance that we have two such distinctive imaginings of a famous swathe of legendary history, separated by more than half a century of turmoil and radical change, inevitably raises the question of the ways in which each play can be said reflect its particular moment. In the case of *Seven Against Thebes*, R.P. Winnington-Ingram has proposed what I think is the essential connection for a play so deeply concerned with the salvation of a city endangered by disordered family relations.¹⁰ He points out that the reforms of Cleisthenes, designed to lessen the power and influence of the great Athenian *genê* by strengthening the specifically civic attachments and loyalties of the citizen, began a process that was still going on in Aeschylus' own lifetime. It seems to me extraordinarily helpful to understand *Septem* as a reflection on the tensions between the old aristocratic family structure and the new order of citizen governance. Eteocles is depicted as operating between the worlds of dynasts preoccupied with privilege and wealth that threaten the state, and that of a polis that owes its survival to the selfless devotion of its citizens. He is finally a figure of contradiction, dying as a member of a doomed

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family, but fighting also as the leader of his city, which he implicates in his family's disastrous feud but also saves by his own and his brother's deaths. Thus through bloody struggle is the curse of the *genos* lifted at last from the polis.

Just as *Phoenician Women's* thematics are different, so too is its political context. If one thinks of the political climate in Athens circa 410, when *Phoenissae* was first produced it lies to hand that Euripides shapes the old tale of the fall of the house of Laius to dramatize the factional strife and the ruthless jockeying for power that were to prove so disastrous for Athens. This was the season of Alcibiades' defection to Sparta and subsequent return from exile. It is fascinating to read the words that Thucydides puts into the mouth of the brilliant renegade in a speech to the Spartans, and to realize that, recast in verse, they could be spoken by the Polynices of *Phoenissae*:

I have no love for my city when it does me wrong, but only when it gives me my rights. Indeed, I do not consider myself to be attacking my own country, but rather to be rewinning a country that is mine no longer. The man who really loves his city, if he loses it unjustly, will not refrain from attack; on the contrary, desire will lead him to do anything to get it back.

(History of the Peloponnesian War 6. 92. 4)

This is not to say that *Phoenissae* is about Alcibiades, or the struggle of Athenian factions, or that it is designed to further the policy of reconciliation of exiles, or to oppose it. Rather, this play seems to share with Thucydides' *History* the sense that at the root of the Athenian political crisis was the loosing of civic ties, the replacement of public interest with the interests of factions and ambitious individuals. Euripides' version of the legend, focusing on themes of self-seeking and self-destruction, gives powerful dramatic expression to the most urgent civic concerns of a difficult moment in Athenian history.

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To conclude, a few words about what I take to be the very different significance of the unbridled ambition that is at the heart of Aristophanes' great political fantasy, the *Birds*.

The beginning of *Birds* sets up a very different journey from the one that Peisetaerus ("Persuasive Companion," the comic hero) finally takes. He and his companion Euelpides are by no means intent upon founding a city. They have escaped from an Athens too full of activity, expense, and bother, and they are looking for a place to settle down that will be free of all the troubles they have fled, the typically Athenian busyness known as *polupragmosune*. But the truly utopian fantasy of an effortless life among the birds simply disappears when Peisetaerus suddenly conceives of a very different vision, a plan to give sovereign power to the birds, which will change their life of ease to a life of striving and strife, turn Peisetaerus himself from hapless layabout to dynamic leader, founder of a new Babylon in mid-air as the capitol of a grand bird-empire; and will eventually lead to the dethroning of Zeus and the usurpation of his powers by none other than Peisetaerus the Athenian.

This inspiration seems to arrive unbidden from nowhere in particular, and indeed it disrupts and contradicts everything that has gone before; but its very nature permits us, as I believe it would have more or less compelled the original audience, to conclude that these seemingly hapless Athenians have misjudged their own most fundamental needs and desires, their own nature as Athenians. In one stroke, Peisetaerus reinvents himself as a true Athenian *polupragmon*. He shapes his new state with all the passion for power, all the political savvy, and all the verbal dexterity of the great Athenian demagogues. Called merely *archon* at line 1123, by line 1708 he is given the title of *turannos*, sole ruler in whom all power is vested. The momentum of Peisetaerus's success begs a whole series of questions: In whose interest does Peisetaerus undertake his vast enterprise, the birds' or his own? Is the new city an ideal community freed of the unpleasant contingencies of human, especially Athenian, civic life, or is it a

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new version of Athens in caricatured form, subject to even more busyness, restlessness, and ambition? The lack of direct answers to such questions reflects paradoxical and contradictory possibilities that are never definitively resolved.

It would certainly be possible to see in Peisetaerus a comic version of Polynices, a usurper of overweening ambition. What weighs against such a view, however, is the recognition that, with all his foibles, he is an Athenian par excellence and, like other Aristophanic protagonists, reflects back to the original Athenian audience a fantasy image of themselves. Thus spectators (the male citizens, at any rate) were invited to enjoy Peisetaerus's rise to power and glory as a fantasy that corresponded in some way to their own nature as Athenians, to their own contradictory hopes for a world free of bother and a world of triumph, plenty, happiness and the fulfillment of outrageous ambitions, not just for themselves alone, but for the city as a collectivity. Above all, Aristophanes puts on display what one might call the Athenian Dream—a dream of life without limits, as full of contradictions and irrationalities as any other dream, impossible but alluring.

This fantasy of unbounded ambition can be usefully aligned with an empowering historical moment. In March of 414, when this play was produced at the City Dionysia, the Sicilian Expedition had already been launched with the greatest of hopes, but the defeat that colors our image of it had not yet happened, or even begun to happen. Yet the danger was there, and could not have been far from the mind of Aristophanes' audience. If we could read Thucydides' description of the fleet's departure innocently, that is, not knowing what we know about the denouement of that tragedy, we might have a clearer sense of what this comedy was aiming for or at. Thucydides emphasizes both the splendor of the flotilla as it sails out to sea, and the enormous expectations that the Athenian people invested in its mission:

Desire ($\partial\rho\pi\omega$) for sailing our fell upon everyone alike. The older men thought that they would easily conquer those whom they were

sent out against, or that so great a force could not entirely come to grief. Those in their prime desired to see and explore that far away land, and had good hope of being spared. The large mass of people and the ordinary soldier expected get paid immediately and to increase the city's power so as to have an endless source of remuneration.

(History of the Peloponnesian War 6. 2 4.3)

The febrile excitement roused by this grand imperial scheme and the hopes it raised of private profit as well as gains in wealth and power for Athens, seem to stand behind the excitement engendered by Peisetaerus's even grander scheme. In saying this, I am in no way suggesting that the *Birds* was some sort of allegory for what was happening in Sicily, either in praise or damnation. I am suggesting that Aristophanes sensed that that single most ambitious experiment in Athenian imperialism marked a significant moment in the history of his times, one that he could parody critically, perhaps, hut lovingly as the clearest representation of the public ambitions of the most ambitious of Greek states, and the private ambitions of its ambitious citizenry.

Notes

¹ Jameson, 1991.

² Vernant 1988.

³ Burian 2011.

⁴ This was proposed by Van Erp Taalman Kip 1987.

⁵ Thus, Kovacs 1997.

⁶ Thus, Roisman 1997.

⁷ Cf. Croally 1994, 232, n. 11.

⁸ Silk 2000.

⁹ See Burian 2009.

¹⁰ Winnington-Ingram 1983, 51-52.

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